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## Paul's Athenian Treasure for the Church

In the story in Acts 17, Paul was forced to escape from Berea quickly when trouble makers stormed in from Thessalonica. Evidently the Jews from Thessalonica were seeking Paul personally, so Silas and Timothy remained in Berea to continue studying with those noble-minded people, while Paul traveled south to Athens with an escort. In Athens, Paul sent his companions back home to Berea with instructions to send Silas and Timothy as soon as possible. Paul planned to wait for them in Athens.

Naturally, Paul kept busy during his wait in Athens. According to Acts 17:17, Paul worked in three directions simultaneously. First, he worked the synagogues, reasoning with the Jews. Second, he worked among the God-fearing Gentiles wherever they could be found. And third, he hung around the marketplace with the pagans shopping there.

### Jews

Of those three groups, Paul would have been most naturally comfortable working among his fellow Jews. Not only were they intimately acquainted with Scripture but they also shared a common background, culture, language, eating and purity habits, ceremonies, feasts, etc. Paul's fellow Jews were family. And so long as Paul was careful not to cross them too much with his distinctive Christian beliefs, the Jews were glad to have him.

So how easy it would have been for Paul to operate carefully enough to avoid upsetting his comfort zone. Had he worked more cautiously and conservatively in the synagogues around Asia Minor, he could have been a welcome celebrity among the Jews most anywhere. Additionally, he could have racked up a great number of nominal conversions, so long as the changes required were minor. He could have felt really satisfied about incrementally deepening his flock's spirituality, increasing their tithing,

building up their community outreach activities, establishing Jewish-run institutions. He could have spent the rest of his life in productive work and lived as a hero among the Jewish people.

### God-fearing Gentiles

But Paul was more mission minded than that. He refused to be satisfied with working among only his own people because he had been commissioned by Jesus as a messenger to the Gentiles. Yet, even then, had Paul been so inclined he could have been much more comfortable working with the many God-fearing Gentiles who were available to him. And while it would have been more difficult than working with the full-blooded Jews, at least the most difficult hurdles had been overcome already. After all, these Gentiles were God-fearing. Their worldview had previously undergone substantial alterations. These people already possessed a foundation for Paul to build upon, but they also had serious room for improvement. Therefore, Paul could have felt particularly missionary-like working among them because they did not necessarily share the same background, culture, language, eating, and purity habits, etc. These God-fearing Gentiles were not family. Indeed, Paul was already pushing the proverbial envelope among the Jewish leadership by working among these Gentiles as much as he was. Some token work among converts, that was fine. Judaism had room for that, but not a lot of room. Thus, Paul could have played it much more safely by working among the God-fearing Gentiles, even while convincing himself that he was living dangerously and obediently to his commission.

### Pagans

However, Paul was even more mission minded than that. Verse 16 says, “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he observed the city full of idols.” I can imagine two reasons why Paul was provoked by the city full of idols; he was provoked for God’s sake because here was a city full of false gods masquerading as true gods. Consequently, Paul was legitimately upset for God’s sake.

Another reason Paul was provoked was out of compassion for the people of Athens who did not know God and would die in their sins if they did not turn to God.

Our cities are still full of idols, of course, even though they are less obvious than what Paul saw; and unfortunately, most of us are fully capable of walking through a city without being provoked in the least by the city’s idols. Where is our sense of God’s honor? Where is our compassion for the people?

Thankfully, Paul was tuned into the Holy Spirit enough to be provoked. And not only did he feel strongly about the situation, he was determined to do something about it because Paul, out of step with the beliefs of his people, believed that God wanted the Athenians to be saved as well. He understood the Global Mission concept was to take the gospel to those who were entirely unreached, including idol-worshipping pagans.

Therefore, Paul hung out at the marketplace where plenty of pagans were to be found. We might say that he formed the first Global Mission Study Center where he used the marketplace to study and test methods of reaching the hearts and minds of pagans in ways they would understand and respond to. He talked to people. He studied their literature, their poets, and their gods. He probably asked many questions. Paul knew that he could not blindly start preaching to the Athenians in the same way that he approached Jews or even God-fearing Gentiles. Paul, through the Holy Spirit, understood that the worldview of the Athenians required an entirely different approach to reach them.

The people at the marketplace reacted to Paul's investigation and speaking in a variety of ways. Some rejected him immediately by saying, "What would this idle babbler wish to say?" "This man is proclaiming strange deities."

### Studying His Audience

It seems that Paul did not know exactly how to reach the pagans in Athens. Evidently, he experienced a few dead ends, but he learned as he mingled directly with the people as one desiring their good. And by this direct contact some people began to want to know more until some said, "Hey, let's listen to him. Bring him to the Areopagus."

Luke pauses the story here to parenthetically inform us that the people of Athens did nothing all day long but talk about and listen to the latest ideas. What did Luke intend by inserting that choice nugget of information in his writing? Initially the impression is that he was accusing the Athenians of being lazy or slothful. But on reflection, the context does not really warrant that impression. It seems more likely that he was actually indicating that the Athenians were experienced thinkers and debaters because they spent so much time doing it. We know the ancient Greeks were philosophers and intelligent thinkers and that they were people well-versed in mathematics, politics, ethics, logic, in creative problem solving, in stretching their minds, and in intelligently destroying any proposition that did not hold together in their way of thinking.

This was the group that produced men like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—men whose legendary work was well known and respected even in Paul's day, and even today they remain nearly as famous as Jesus

Christ himself. If Paul felt at all intimidated by speaking to the Athenians at the Areopagus, I cannot say that I would blame him. In fact, some of Ellen White's comments lead me to believe that Paul was a little too impressed with the reputation of the philosophers of Athens, causing him to call upon his eloquence, logic, and oratory, which he later regretted doing.

It has been Paul's custom in his preaching to adopt an oratorical style. He was a man fitted to speak before kings, before the great and learned men of Athens, and his intellectual acquirements were often of value to him in preparing the way for the gospel. He tried to do this in Athens, meeting false philosophy with true philosophy, eloquence with eloquence, and logic with logic, but he failed to meet with the success he had hoped for. His aftersight led him to see that there was something needed above human wisdom even of men of learning. God taught him that something above the world's wisdom must come to him. He must receive his power from a higher source. (White 1899:453, 454)

When Paul's day on the rock arrived, of course the Holy Spirit was at work in him. But in addition, he also possessed a reservoir of experience with the Athenian people. His study of their culture, their beliefs, their religion, and their worldview had begun to inform his mind. And the Holy Spirit, using that education, transformed Paul's method of speaking to the Athenians, *but* not the way Paul had reckoned the Holy Spirit would work through him. Paul thought that the Holy Spirit might effectively use his oratorical skills and eloquence that he had gained in his upbringing and his education under Gamaliel. But in reality it was Paul's education on the streets of Athens that the Holy Spirit was able to use. Ellen White says, "The wisest of his hearers were astonished as they listened to his reasoning. He showed himself familiar with their works of art, their literature, and their religion" (1911:337).

To me this is an extremely important point. God did not work through Paul's eloquence and skill as a preacher. God did not work through the skills Paul learned in Jerusalem and that he brought with him to Athens. Instead God used what Paul had learned on the streets in Athens during his direct contact with the people. God used his study of the people, their customs, their literature, and their religion, as Paul worked among them as one desiring their good. Notice what happened next.

### Respect

One vital point that leaps out of the story is that Paul did not in any way disparage the false religion or false gods of the Athenians. He gathered

whatever points of good he could find, few as they were, and capitalized on them. "People of Athens, I see that in every way you are very religious" (Acts 17:22).

This was a compliment from Paul the Christian to the Athenian pagans. Their religion was misguided in every way, but Paul complimented their devotion to it because the fact is that caring about even misguided religious things is more commendable than not caring at all about religious things. Paul continued: "As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship. . . ." By describing his own study of the Athenian religion, Paul communicated a respectful attitude toward the people. He did not come rushing in as a self-proclaimed expert with all the answers for how the people needed to change. The reality was that he was an expert with the answers people needed, but he did not present himself that way or else he would have been rejected outright by everyone. And rightfully so. Instead, he was seen as someone who cared for the people and the culture and desired their good.

I remember when I was working in Moscow at the Euro-Asia Division, an American pastor came to do a series of meeting. When he returned to Moscow to fly home after his meetings, my wife and I invited him to have a meal with us. As we visited his words stunned us as he shared his feelings regarding the culture of the Russian people. He said literally, in these words, "I don't care about the culture or about the people, I only care about preaching the gospel." I just hope God was able to control the damage such an attitude leaves in its wake.

## Bridge

"As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship," said Paul, "I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god" (17:23). In his study and contact with the culture and the people, Paul had stumbled upon a valuable point of contact, a bridge that might open the way to deeper conversation, and one that would not turn people away. He did not scoff at the negative idea of an altar to an unknown god. Instead, he appreciated and admired a people who, in their ignorance, cared enough about spiritual things to go to the effort and expense of worshipping something they did not even know, just in case they were missing something. Were they misguided? Yes, but that could be fixed. What was important in the beginning was that they were devout in what they did understand. That, Paul recognized, was material the Holy Spirit could work with.

Paul continued, "What you worship as unknown, this I publicly make known to you."

Imagine the way Paul's words may have impressed the people. "Here is something you don't know, and the reason I know you don't know it is because you said so. I do know what it is, and I welcome the opportunity to share it with you." Paul had found a hook that would pique their interest. This was not a radical, instantly life-changing way to begin sharing the gospel; rather it was a relatively novel opening to people's minds. Paul had not created a fantastic new formula for mass evangelizing Asia Minor. To our knowledge this was the one and only time that he opened his proclamation in this way because this is the only instance in which such an opening would work.

### Transition

Now that Paul had their attention, he turned his words to the God of heaven.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. (Acts 17:24-27)

For a people who cared enough about spiritual things to build an altar to an unknown god, Paul's words were intriguing—a creator God who does not live in a temple, needs nothing from humans, but instead supplies human needs. For people steeped in Greek mythology, where the gods needed humans in some way or another, where the gods were finicky and unpredictable, could we even say the gods were immature and at times cruel, the idea of a God who created human beings not for what they could do for him but for what he could do for them was a wonderfully intriguing thought.

And the men from Aeropagus took their first baby steps toward a God of love. This God that they did not know, Paul said, could be known. Indeed, this God wanted to be known. And he sounded like a God they would like to know. "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27).

Putting myself in the place of the Athenians, I can imagine my heart being stirred by such words. Then, because Paul had been studying their

culture, he was able again to bridge these thoughts with words from their literature. "For in him we live and move and have our being. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring'" (v. 28).

This connection to their poets was minimal. Probably Paul could not find a great deal he could use in their literature. But he used what he could. Just a few words. Not particularly profound words or words that in their context had anything at all to do with the God of heaven. But they were words that could be used as a connection point. And it was that connecting point that Paul recognized as invaluable, not to his message as much as to his method of delivering the message.

### Basic Concepts

My guess is that Paul probably spoke longer at the Aeropagus than just the few words Luke shared in this account. It seems reasonable that for the sake of space Luke summarized Paul's speech. If that is true, then each of the concepts mentioned so far, Paul actually added far more details in his presentation. Notice the concepts in Paul's speech:

1. Paul first spent some time complimenting the current spiritual awareness and sincerity of the Athenians.
2. Then he spent some time showing that he had studied them and that he appreciated and respected what he had learned.
3. Next he told them about one particular thing that he had discovered in his study of their religion that they admitted they did not understand.
4. After that he shared with them the aspect of God that he knew they desperately needed, which was the love God had for them.
5. Finally, at the end of his speech Paul moved to warning them of what it means to reject the knowledge of this God they did not yet know.

### Crossing the Line

Therefore, since Christians are God's offspring, they should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human's design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:29-31).

After his speech there was some squirming at the Aeropagus. Paul crossed a line that he had carefully avoided to this point. He had avoided it because to cross this line too soon would close the minds of the people



against what he had to say. But he also knew that eventually he had to cross the line and share the inevitable consequences of continuing to ignore the true God.

Luke provides two reactions to Paul's closing words. Some sneered at the idea of resurrection. Others said they wanted to hear Paul again on the matter. But what is key in this story for today's purposes is that *all of them had actually listened*. And that was Paul's hope from the beginning.

There will always be some people who will reject the gospel, but we must do everything possible to ensure that before those reject it they understand what they are rejecting. For the Athenians who rejected the gospel, Paul, by his method of working among them, by his strategic use of what he had studied and learned of them, ensured that they understood that a God existed whom they did not know but who had created them, who still loved them, who had been merciful to them in spite of their ignorance, but that judgment day was coming, and there was verifiable evidence for all of this in the resurrection of Christ.

### Treasure of Knowledge

One of the primary conclusions from this story is Paul's on-the-ground study of how to approach an unreached group of pagans, which resulted in a small group of believers starting in Athens. In *Acts of the Apostles* Ellen White notes that later in Corinth Paul decided to abandon the oratorical strategy he used in Athens. He recognized that his reliance on his skill as a speaker had profited little, but she notes the following at the end of the story:

The words of the apostle, and the description of his attitude and surroundings, as traced by the pen of inspiration, were to be handed down to all coming generations, bearing witness of his unshaken confidence, his courage in loneliness and adversity, and the victory he gained for Christianity in the very heart of paganism.

Paul's words contain a treasure of knowledge for the church. He was in a position where he might easily have said that which would have irritated his proud listeners and brought himself into difficulty. Had his oration been a direct attack upon their gods and the great men of the city, he would have been in danger of meeting the fate of Socrates. But with a tact born of divine love, he carefully drew their minds away from heathen deities, by revealing to them the true God, who was to them unknown. (1911:240, 241)

Paul, by his direct contact with the people, his study of their culture and religion, and his respect for their ignorant devotion, managed



something notable in Athens—something that is a treasure of knowledge for the church. *He avoided irritating his listeners.* That was in and of itself a major accomplishment. That, according to Ellen White, is the treasure of knowledge that we as a church need to pay attention to in this story.

## Works Cited

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